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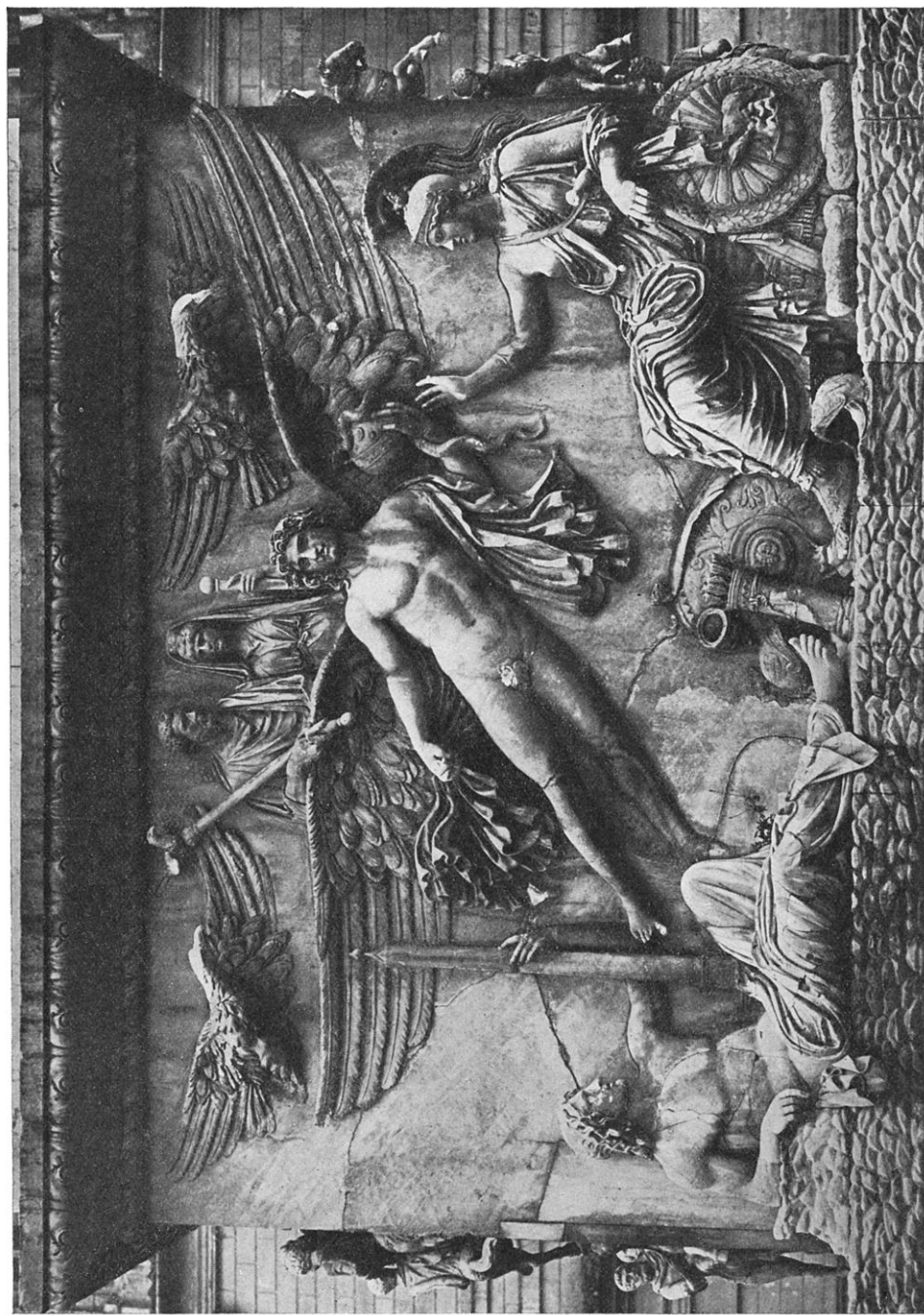
NUMBER 2

Editorial

HEREDITARY RELIGION

In all the higher interests and experiences of human life, the original elements which the individual contributes out of his own personal experience are so inextricably involved and interwoven with the inherited elements which he receives from his antecedents and environment that it is practically impossible completely to distinguish the two. But any fair account or analysis of any of the great spiritual interests of humanity must recognize, and so far as possible do justice to, both aspects of the matter—the personal achievements of the individual, and the heritage into which he enters as the heir of the generations gone before. The artist, for instance, may be a genius of unusual personal gifts; but the chances are that even his aesthetic sense and capacity came to him by inheritance from an artistic ancestry; and in any case his own gifts cannot come to their full development apart from the stimulating influence and indispensable equipment which artistic tradition furnishes to the individual artist. In the realm of music the case is the same: the individual musician, however great his personal genius, is indebted to his ancestry for his gifts, and to the accumulated musical culture and labor of centuries for the capital which he seeks to enlarge. In all departments of human activity the modern recognition of heredity and of social interdependence has given new point to the old question of the Apostle, “What hast thou that thou didst not receive?”

This truth of indebtedness to one's inheritance, thus valid in all other departments of human life, holds with special force in the



THE APOTHEOSIS OF ANTONINUS AND FAUSTINA

realm of religion. True it is that religion is essentially and fundamentally a personal matter—the most personal of all matters—which must be possessed by the individual in his own experience if it is to be real and vital. This great Christian truth, permanently recovered by the Protestant Reformation, has rightly been in the forefront of Christian thought and preaching ever since. It has led to the emphasis on conversion as individual regeneration and individual commitment to the following of Christ, that has been so prominent ever since in all branches of the Christian church. It has magnified the thought of individual responsibility before God and of personal salvation as the goal of religion, that have been such characteristic marks of Protestantism since the Reformation. The individuality of real religion remains a fundamental Christian truth which nothing in this editorial is intended, and nothing in modern thinking must be allowed, to overlook or obscure.

But in religion, as in all the other higher and spiritual realms of our mysterious and many-sided human life, it is also true that the debt of the individual to his ancestry and inheritance is incalculably great. And this side of the truth is one that in much of the modern Protestantism has been too largely overlooked. Certain of our great Christian communions, to be sure, especially those which have strongly emphasized the place and dignity of the historic church, have rendered a great service to Christian thought by their steady insistence on this truth. And every individual Christian who has thoughtfully and fairly taken an inventory of his own spiritual possessions has recognized how largely these have been mediated to him by a godly ancestry and by the great Christian inheritance into which he has entered as the spiritual heir of “Saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs.”

But the fact remains that in spite of these individual and ecclesiastical recognitions of the truth for which we are contending, it has all too often in these modern days, and especially in our strongly individualistic America, been neglected or forgotten. Texts like those in the Forty-eighth or Eighty-seventh psalms which magnify spiritual inheritance in Zion, the pointed question already quoted from I Corinthians, chap. 4, or the significant phrase with which Paul opens his Second Epistle to Timothy—“I

thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers in a pure conscience"—have been too rarely preached from. The great obligation of spiritual trusteeship, which rests upon parents for their children and upon older Christians in the church for the younger, has been too little emphasized. The wealth and glory of the church's inheritance of Christian truth and experience and loyalty and sacrifice from all the generations and centuries past, has been too little impressed upon its ignorant or indifferent modern heirs. And often as we sing the great hymn of Bishop How, we sing it none too often—

For all the saints who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.
Alleluia.

For we live in an age when the recognition of the large hereditary element in religion is vitally and increasingly important. The weakening in what we might call *family* religion that has gone along with the decay or neglect of the family altar is not the least serious aspect of that general weakening of the home that is so marked a characteristic of modern American life, particularly in the cities. The lessened loyalty to the church that, in spite of all that the modern Young Peoples' and Sunday-school movements have done to counteract it, still distinguishes the younger generation of today from those that preceded them, points to this same need. And the general lack of any sense of hereditary obligation and responsibility in religious matters, that is so characteristic of younger Americans, is further evidence of the same sort. An Oxford professor, commenting once with surprise on the remark of a young American woman that her mother was an Episcopalian and her father a Congregationalist, but that she herself was thinking of becoming a Catholic, expressed well just this sense of hereditary responsibility when he said: "Why, with my ancestry and spiritual inheritance, I should feel that I must be a Scotch Presbyterian whether or no."

How then can this sense of hereditary responsibility, this recognition of the large inherited element in religion, be developed among us? More especially, how can we conserve and pass on to

the next generation, at least intact, if possible enlarged and enriched, the spiritual heritage that has come down to us? First and foremost, the responsibilities of spiritual trusteeship on the part of parents and older friends of children must be laid more heavily upon them. Where in earlier days parents took their children to church, read and repeated Bible stories and sang hymns with them, and taught them to pray, the modern American parent too often sends his children to Sunday school while he stays at home to read the Sunday paper. With what a wealth of rich inheritance and tradition and influence the Bible and Christian history and the church can permanently endow a child's life, when these are mediated to the child through Christian parents and a Christian home in his early years! Many a mature Christian realizes increasingly as he thinks back over his own life how many of its best fruits have grown directly from the seeds which Christian parents planted in his receptive soul during the impressionable years of childhood. And what he has received he ought also to transmit for it cannot be emphasized too strongly that parents hold these treasures in trust for their children; and that where for any reason the parents fail to be faithful to their trusteeship, the children never enter into their rich inheritance. Merely to give a child a book of Bible stories to read, or merely to send a child to Sunday school that he may there learn Christian truth and duty from the lips of another, is not to discharge this sacred obligation of spiritual trusteeship. If these seeds are to grow to their best fruitage, they must be sown in the child's life at just the right time, and watched and watered with tender care by the same hand that sowed them; and that is a parent's privilege—a parent's duty.

Again, we must build up the family altar that is broken down, and must kindle upon it again the devotion of vital *family* religion. Under the new conditions and in the forced pace of modern life, particularly in the cities, it will doubtless be necessary to modify in some measure the traditional worship of the family altar as many of us were brought up on it. Very likely the family may not be able to gather around it so often, nor at the same times and places, as in the simpler and less crowded days of our fathers. But some time, somewhere, the modern home must keep alive the flame of

family piety upon its household altar: and this, not only for the sake of the generation that now is, but even more for the sake of the generation that is to be.

And finally, the church must recognize its large share of responsibility as the institutional mediator to its children of their spiritual inheritance, and must discharge this trusteeship by a more intelligent and earnest work among them. Indispensably valuable as is the work of the Sunday school, the entire responsibility for the religious nurture of children in the church cannot be left to the Sunday school without running the risk of making the latter in the child's mind a sufficient substitute for the church. At present this happens all too often, with the result that when boys and girls reach the age where they think they are old enough to cease going to Sunday school, they drop out of contact with all organized religious life and work, because they have never formed the habit of church-going, and have never learned to love the church as their own. The importance of acquiring this habit and this attitude toward the church *in childhood* can hardly be overestimated; and by whatever methods may be best adapted to its local conditions, the church must work with parents toward such acquisition. Only by such co-operative effort can the coming generation be prepared for and endowed with its great spiritual heritage.